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'Re: turn': Bashir Makhoul

[Shela Sheikh](#)

As part of the Collateral Events of this year's 55th Venice Biennale, Palestinian Art Court – al Hoash (in partnership with The American University in Cairo and Winchester School of Art) presented 'Otherwise Occupied', an installation in the Liceo Artistico Statale di Venezia (LASV) of Palazzo Ca' Giustinian Recanati by Palestinian artists Bashir Makhoul and Aissa Deebi.¹

Curated by Bruce Ferguson and Rawan Sharaf, the installation comprised *Giardino Occupato* by Makhoul, an 'occupation' of the garden with thousands of cardboard boxes that builds upon his earlier large-scale installation *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*, a full-sized interior maze and large cardboard model of an Arab town or refugee camp which 'questioned the kinds of spaces that have emerged in sites of conflict and in urban margins of globalization';² and Deebi's *The Trial*, a two-channel installation accompanied by twenty-four drawings consisting of the re-enactment of a speech by Daoud Turki, a Palestinian-Arab citizen of Israel, at the Haifa court house in which he served as a defendant during a military trial in 1973, having been accused of espionage and collaboration with the enemy.³



Bashir Makhoul, *Giardino Occupato*, detail, installation of cardboard constructions in the 'Otherwise Occupied' exhibition, official Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013

Both artists were born within the 1948 borders, having subsequently emigrated: Makhoul (born 1963) has been based in Britain since the nineties, and Deebi (born 1969) is based in New York and Cairo.⁴ Both, as the lives as Palestinians and are in search of new ways to imagine

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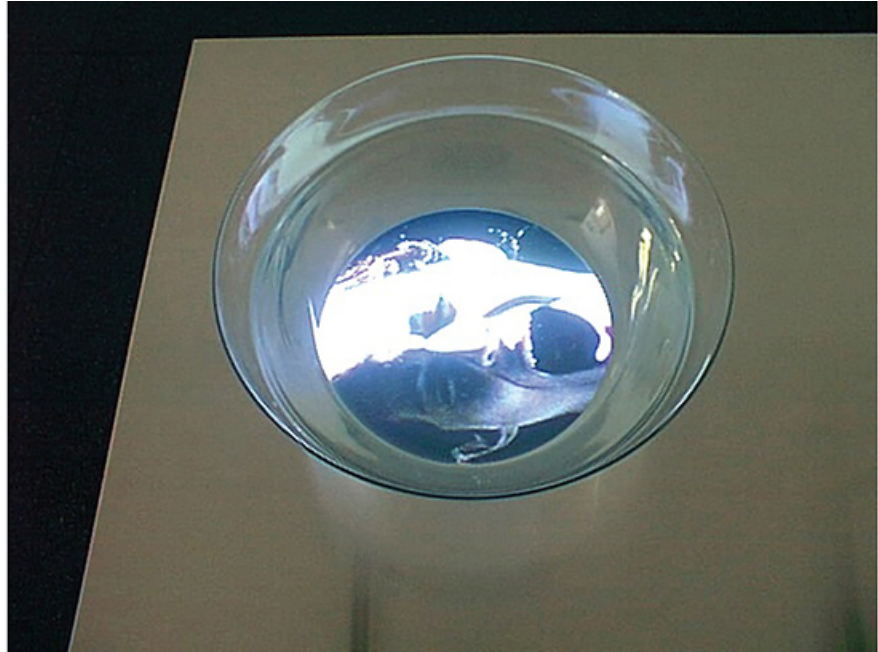
the nation from a distance.’⁵ These two artists’ works promised to converse with each other, with the cacophony of artistic signatures of the Biennale and its many audiences, and with an accompanying publication. My point of departure here, however, is the conversation already established between the many works of Makhoul and the various critics/colleagues with whom he has shared an ongoing dialogue over the course of several years. As such, the publication of *Bashir Makhoul* (2012), a monograph of the artist’s oeuvre thus far, seems timely for those wishing to engage with the artist’s practice beyond the particularity of the Venice installation.

First published in 2012, the monograph marks the third publication in the Palestinian art series by Palestinian Art Court – al Hoash (one of the several organizations that collaborated to produce last year’s Qalandiya International art festival, the first Palestinian biennial)⁶ – a series which, according to the cover blurb, ‘is working to realise its aspiration of initiating a bi-annual series of research-based publications.’⁷

Comprised of critical responses published between 1993 and 2012, as well as an extensive conversation between Makhoul and long-term interlocutor Gordon Hon, the publication (the design of which, unfortunately, betrays its seriousness) is very much a retrospective, as indicated by the title of the Introduction by August Jordan Davis and Jonathan Harris, ‘Re: Turn’ – a motif of



Cover of *Bashir Makhoul*, edited by August Davis and Jonathan Harris, showing detail of *Thirst* by Bashir Makhoul; design by Ray Yang



Bashir Makhoul, *Thirst*, detail, video projection and sculptural installation, 1999

looking back, return, repetition and ghostly *revenance* that becomes a guiding thread not only for Makhoul's works, which I will come to, but also for the structure of the book itself. (For a start, does not a monograph always imply some spectral, future anterior absent-present trace of both the artist and his oeuvre? But in this case it is more than just this formal structure.) Revenance, in fact, is evoked by two of the essays' titles, David Owens' 'Returning Time: The Political Art of Bashir Makhoul' of 2007 and Gordon Hon's essay 'Return and the Spectres of Occupation', also from 2007,⁸ and, more obliquely – as the ghostly *revenant* that, unlike the *spectre* or *phantom* and its etymological references to visibility and appearing in the light ('phantasme', relating to *phainesthai*, Greek 'to appear' and *phenomenality*), arises precisely where there is no foreseeability or verifiability⁹ – by the title of Jonathan Harris' 2008 text, "'Visible but unverifiable': Spectacles of Power and Palestine in *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*'. 'Visible but unverifiable', to borrow a phrase from Eyal Weizman's *Hollow Land* (2007), a now-seminal study of the politics of verticality and the surface of the earth as 'the *fitna* of space in turmoil, conflict and trial', as Ryan Bishop puts it in his essay, 'Spectres of Perception, or The Illusion of Having the Time to See: The Geopolitics of Objects, Apprehension and Movement in Bashir Makhoul's *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*' (236) or of 'optical urbanism', which Harris takes as one of his tropes in his reading of Makhoul's installation (217).¹⁰

Any essay on Makhoul's *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* – a title borrowed from the stage directions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which the ghost, as Jacques Derrida puts it, can only begin by returning¹¹ – would have to deal with ghostly return, or with notions of repetition, intensity, frequency, absence/presence and visibility/invisibility – issues dealt with artfully by Harris and Bishop's responses to this work to which Makhoul returns in Venice. In Makhoul's words, this work 'best explores my interest in the complexity of repetition in the broadest sense' (205), and it takes its leave from the earlier series of lenticular photographs of 2007, *Return*, as discussed by Makhoul and Hon (see 192–205). In Harris' words, *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* 'works to "make strange" the nature of image and imagery and to problematize the relations of vision, visibility, knowledge,

consciousness, self-consciousness and position' (221). And as Bishop puts it just prior to discussions of 'the terrible intimacy of geopolitical struggle' and Makhoul's use of cardboard for its 'explicit vulnerability and exposure' in a cityscape that would otherwise be assumed to be a defensive gathering,

we all enter (as) ghost and exit (as) ghost. This is the fate of us all, and part of what haunts the installation is its explicit role as *memento mori*. The thin line between presence and absence

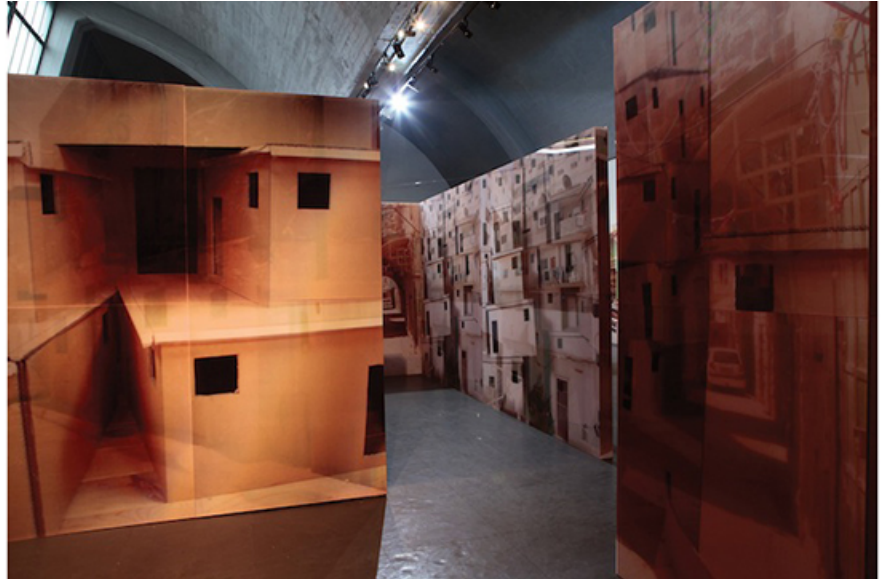
demarcated by ghosts speaks to our existential condition, a commentary furthered by the cardboard houses of this installation in that they [*sic*] signify unoccupied homes in what is often called occupied territory [Enter the *Otherwise Occupied* installation]. That the images themselves make ghostly visions of sites in which much of the military technology used in these locales has created many ghosts (some even premature ghosts, if we can assume such temporal and existential claims) reminds us of this shared fate, this shared human bond found in spectres. (242)

Besides the 'revenantial', the notion of the 're: turn' brings to mind the 'right of return' which haunts any discourse on Palestinian identity (all the more so with this year's sixty-fifth anniversary of the Nakba: the forcing out of their homes and into exile of hundreds of thousands of Arabs), as is discussed throughout the essays in terms of many of Makhoul's works arising from his family history and his constant questioning, through the work, of the construction of (Palestinian) identity and the dangers with which this is necessarily always beset: the threat, for instance, of identity being founded upon a construction (and hence the need to problematize ideas of authenticity and inauthenticity).

Rather, for Makhoul, identity is formulated as ever-becoming and constantly shifting, as such ultimately rendering it impossible to steal, appropriate or perhaps destroy (the reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conception of the nomadic does not escape Hon, although its relevance to the concrete situation in Palestine is questioned by Makhoul; see 150). What emerges here, then, is Makhoul's émigré or 'outsider' position and his refusal to conform with 'the traditional Palestinian art of resistance – its didactic, illustrative imagery, or even the lyrical, poetic nationalism' (149), with this in itself being his 'weapon of resistance', as Hon puts it (149).

Turning, or returning, to the beginning of the book, by splitting the 're-' and the 'turn' of 're: turn' in their Introduction – or '(re)turn', as they also put it – Davis and Harris allow room for the essays that follow to be guided not only by the movement of repetition but also by the movement of the turn – the 'strophes' and 'apostrophes' that Bishop identifies as 'the *topoi* of possibility' in his

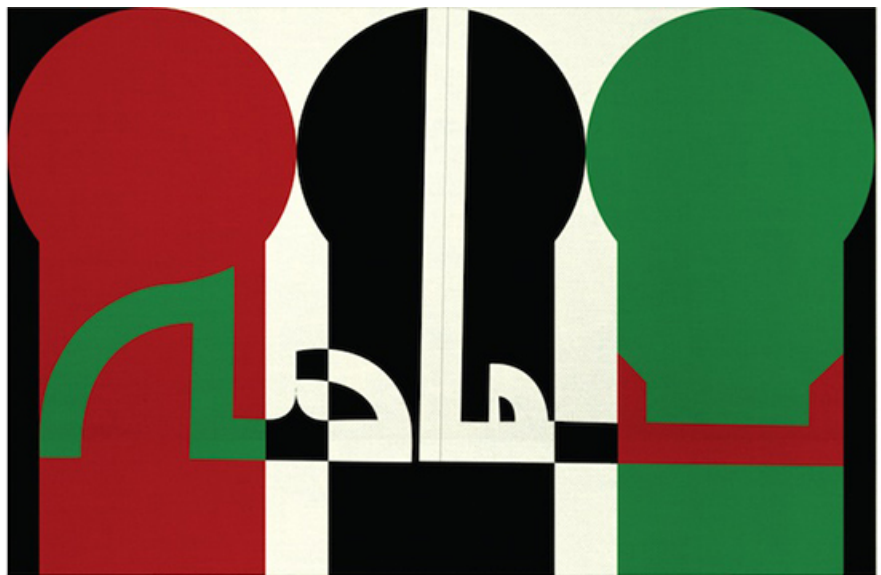




Bashir Makhoul, details of the installation *Enter Ghost Exit Ghost*, lenticular photographic panels and cardboard constructions, Yang Gallery, 798 Arts District, Beijing, China, 2012

discussion of the 'ethics of movement' (235) (Greek apostrophos 'accent of elision', from apostrophein 'turn away', from apo 'from' + strephein 'to turn'), the 'contrapuntal disjunctures' deployed in Makhoul's early works (see 24), or the idea of counterpoint evoked by Edward Said (see 33) – thus re-inflecting in advance the readings of Makhoul's earlier works with the disorienting turns that are inherent to the visitor's progression through the maze-like construction of *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* which, as they put it, 'pushes on the boundaries between movement and narrative' (21), ultimately leading to the turning, disequilibrium, vertigo and disorder that, besides the terror they might install, are identified by Paul Virilio as sources of pleasure (see 21).

Continuing with the notion of turning and orientation, perhaps most striking of the written engagements is that of Bishop, who deftly traces his way through Makhoul's labyrinthal installation by reading, looking and feeling with thinkers such as Virilio, Derrida, Weizman, Jean-Luc Nancy and Roland Barthes, with the ghost of Shakespeare of course always waiting in the wings. Rather than simply 'applying' theory to the work of art, Bishop (who, like Harris, is named as official



Bashir Makhoul, *Intifada*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 300 x 200 cm

'critic' on Makhoul's ongoing 'Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost' project team)¹² proposes that the work itself comes to *re-orient* not only the visitor of the installation (in his/her physical and conceptual positioning and outlook, as expounded upon by Harris in his essay) but also our reading (for instance, of the very philosophers/theorists who thematize perception): in this case coming to function as a tool 'to query Virilio's ever-prescient but problematic relation between speed, perception, image and observer to argue for a more complex relativity of knowledge than that suggested by many of his writings' (231). At stake here is not only knowledge, sensing and perception, but also diversion, orientation ('positioning', not only spatially but conceptually and politically), and with it disorientation and 'making strange', above all in the work's use of endlessly and non-sequentially repeated lenticular panels (first used in the abovementioned *Return* series) and the directing and misdirecting of the images they bear; the rapidity with which the images appear and disappear as the viewer crosses the image's plane, moving as they do with the shift of the visitor's head (see 231).

Identifying the various 'turns' in Makhoul's practice (for instance, 'the photographic turn'; 22), what becomes apparent throughout the essays is an 'endless cycling', not only between entering and exiting, as in *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* (see 239), but also as a constitutive *re-cycling* of motifs and mediums that brings to mind what one might think of as the layerings of some cyclical palimpsest: the palimpsest (also thematized by Davis and Harris) that is at once 'an elegant metaphor for the violently inelegant history of Palestine throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' (33) and a metaphor for Makhoul's practice – the continual layerings of the myriad surfaces of Makhoul's varying mediums: paintings, photography, sculptural installations, video, lenticular microlens printing and beyond – and the repeated issues and tropes taken up and repeatedly returned to



Bashir Makhoul, *Points of View*, wallpaper installation at the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1999

throughout the essays (despite the seeming linearity of their temporal progression), beginning with two early responses by Sean Cubitt, the 'Arabesques: Bashir Makhoul And The Unfinished Project of Modernism' of 1994 and the 1998 'The Churning of the Waters', through Lewis Biggs' 1999 'Hold' to the aforementioned texts by Owen, Hon, Harris and Bishop. Although, '[a]s with the palimpsest, there is no pure state, no return to an original movement, no fixity' (33), no 'originary' ground zero at which to begin, but rather an always revenant and palimpsestic point of departure, where this abundantly illustrated monograph no doubt distinguishes itself from recent catalogues of Makhoul's work is in its historical and conceptual breadth and the inhabitation of the artist's oeuvre – however disorienting and displacing this may be – into which the reader is beckoned.

Bashir Makhoul, edited by August Jordan Davis and Jonathan Harris, was published by Palestinian Art Court – al Hoash, Jerusalem, 2012.

1 The exhibition ran from 29 May to 30 June 2013. For more information, see <http://www.alhoashgallery.org> and <http://www.palestineatvenice.com/index.html>. Al Hoash is a Jerusalem-based, non-profit Palestinian organization that seeks the development of visual arts as a substantial and critical tool for communication, innovation and free expression through programmes that are research-based, community-linked and provide platforms for education, discourse and critical analysis.

2 See 'The Venice Questionnaire #3: Bashir Makhoul', *ArtReview*, http://artreview.com/previews/3_venice_bashir_makhoul/, accessed 19 May 2013.

3 For further information about the works, see <http://www.palestineatvenice.com/artworks.html>.

4 Makhoul, who received his doctorate in 1995 from Manchester Metropolitan University, was the Head of Department of Art and Design and the Director of the Research Institute of Media, Art and Design at the University of Bedfordshire (previously Luton). He was also the founding Head of School of Media Art and Design at the same University, Head of Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton) and is currently Pro Vice-Chancellor at Birmingham City University. Deebi received his doctorate from the University of Southampton in 2012. He has taught art and design at many institutions, including the Winchester School of Art, Centro de Estudios Superiores de Diseño de Monterrey (Mexico) and Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok). In 2010 he joined the American University of Cairo's Arts Department, and in 2011 he was appointed to become the Director of the Visual Cultures Program. Deebi is the Director of Sharjah Art Gallery at AUC and a founding member of ArteEast in New York City, where he served as the first Director of the Visual Arts and Director of the Board. He is also a consultant on education for the Birzet University's Museum in Palestine, and the curator of Mizna, the Arab American Art and Literature Magazine in Minneapolis, USA. Both artists have exhibited work, in a variety of mediums, across the globe. For full biographies, see the artists' websites: <http://www.bashirmakhoul.com> and <http://www.aissadeebi.com>.

5 <http://www.palestineatvenice.com/curatorialstatement.html>

6 See <http://www.qalandiyainternational.org>.

7 'These publications should enrich the Palestinian library and contribute to documenting and preserving Palestinian art. Additionally, the series fosters research, analysis and critical study of contemporary art. Our ambition for, and belief in, art and culture is to contribute to the preservation and dissemination of Palestinian art, culture and identity.'

8 Both of these texts were first published in Bashir Makhoul, *Return in Conflict*, IssueArt, New York, 2007.

9 See Jacques Derrida, 'Death Penalties' in Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, Jeff Fort, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2004, pp 139–165, pp 230–231, note 4. See also Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Patrick Mensah, trans, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998, p 25.

10 Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, Verso, London, 2007

11 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Peggy Kamuf, trans, Routledge, London and New York, 1994. Derrida's text, as well as his 'Marx and Sons' in Michael Spinker, ed, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, Verso, London, 2008, is discussed by Ryan Bishop; pp 231, p 233, p 239.